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The Sadr II Movement: An Organizational Fight for Legitimacy within the Iraqi Shi'a Community

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Introduction

After the fall of Saddam Hussein, the Shi'a population in Iraq was overnight converted from disenfranchised minority to an emboldened majority. This rapid devolution of power within Iraq, created organizational conflict within the Shi'a community as leaders vied for authority. Within the Shi'a religious hierarchy an unexpected force emerged, Muqtada al-Sadr. Using social movement theory^[1] as a framework for analysis, I will examine the Sadr II movement in the context of political opportunity, organization, and the framing used to mobilize support. While Sunni-based insurgents and foreign elements led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi have contributed the predominance of violent actions against the Coalition, Muqtada al-Sadr represents the only named, public figure that stands in opposition to the Coalition and the emerging Iraqi government. While the August 2004 standoff in Najaf and the January 2005 elections produced setbacks for the Sadr II movement, the same mobilization structures and message that motivated his following remains as a potentially strong, violent opposition to a budding Iraqi democracy.

Sadr II Movement: Opportunities and Mobilizing Structures

Muqtada al-Sadr is the leader of the Shi'a opposition in Iraq which demanded expulsion of Coalition forces and creation of an Iraqi theocratic government. His rise to prominence within the Shi'a community largely went unnoticed by the United States government. In retrospect, a leader emerging from the al-Sadr school of Islamic thought should not have been a surprise, but the emergence of young, Muqtada al-Sadr as the leader could not have been anticipated.^[2] Muqtada al-Sadr has assumed the mantle as "speaking cleric" demanding a more activist role for Iraqi Shi'a leaders. In doing so, he continues the opposition to secular government begun by his father-in-law,^[3] Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (killed by the Hussein regime in 1982)^[4] and his father Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr (killed by the Hussein regime in 1999).^[5]

The Shi'a community in Iraq has endured repression and subjugation for over 100 hundred years. Beginning with the Sunni-dominated Ottoman Empire and continuing through the rule of Saddam Hussein, the Shi'a have experienced discrimination and oppression. Recent history in Saddam's Iraq has been particularly brutal.

Following the Shi'a revolution in Iran, the Hussein government feared the rise of a sympathetic movement developing in Iraq.[6] At that time, the Al-Dawa al-Islayyya Party espoused such a position. One of al-Dawa's leaders was Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, who had separated his activist message from the traditional, apolitical message of the leading clerics in Shi'a shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala. In the aftermath of Khomeni's Revolution in Iran, Saddam Hussein had Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr killed. Prior to his death, Baqir al-Sadr guided his cousin, Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr through his Islamic studies, graduating him as an independent scholar of legal reasoning in 1977. Sadiq al-Sadr continued his studies and by the mid-1990s began calling for an Iraqi state governed by Islamic law.[7]

Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr attacked the Hussein regime, clearly distinguishing him from traditional, apolitical Shi'a leaders, such as Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani. Sadiq al-Sadr called himself the "speaking jurisprudent" and labeling Shi'a leaders in Najaf, "silent jurisprudents." [8] In doing so, Sadiq al-Sadr created a growing following, particularly among urban Iraqi youth. Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr defied the Hussein regime, organizing Friday prayers, which had been forbidden in Shi'a mosques. Iraqi sociologist Faleh A. Jabar described Sadiq al-Sadr's growing popularity:

Al-Sadr was originally a handpicked government appointee, but he grew publicly critical of Ba'ath Party rule in his widely attended sermons. For the first time in a generation, a Shi'ite *imam* built vast networks of followers among the peasantry and the urban middle classes, and forged an alliance with influential urban merchants and tribal chieftains.[9]

Eventually, Sadiq al-Sadr's defiance cost him his life. In early 1999, he was gunned down while traveling to his office in Najaf. The successor to Sadiq al-Sadr, Ayatollah Kazim al-Hairi, studied in Qom, Iran, far from the base of the Sadr movement.[10] While it appeared that the Sadr movement had been broken, in reality the Sadr movement survived but had been forced to the underground. Within the underground, Muqtada al-Sadr seized the opportunity to ascend to the leadership of the Sadr movement.

In his analysis of potential Shi'a leaders that could emerge in post-Saddam Iraq, Faleh A. Jabar anticipated the re-emergence of the Sadr II movement.[11] What he did not anticipate was the role Sadiq al-Sadr's twenty-something[12] son would play as leader of growing numbers of disenfranchised youth. Muqtada al-Sadr's ascendancy to the role of accepted leader of the Sadr movement was highly unlikely. At the time of the U.S. invasion, Muqtada al-Sadr, was likely under the age of thirty, had not yet completed his Islamic studies, and had been almost unknown in the West. His personal opportunity was ordained by three key events:

1. The death of his father;
2. The decision by Ayatollah Kazim al-Hairi to remain in Iran;
3. The subsequent designation of Muqtada al-Sadr as al-Hairi's representative in Iraq.

Muqtada al-Sadr seized the opportunity to lead the Sadr II movement. The political opportunity for the Sadr movement was provided by the U.S.-led Coalition. The toppling of the Hussein regime created a power vacuum in urban Shi'a areas, which was quickly filled by the Sadr II movement.

Under Muqtada al-Sadr's leadership, the Sadr movement contrasted itself with the positions of other Shi'a leaders. These leaders included: Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani (an Oracle of Emulation representing traditional Shi'a jurisprudence), Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim (leader of Iranian-based Supreme Council for Islamic Republic of Iraq), and Abu al-Qasim al-Khu'i (son of revered Najaf scholar Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khu'i). In this group, Muqtada al-Sadr and his growing vanguard of young clerics positioned the Sadr II movement as the strongest advocate for an Iraqi Islamic state governed by Islamic law without the interference of foreign powers.

While the 1990's Sadr movement of Sadiq al-Sadr never reached the following of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani or al-Khu'i, Sadiq al-Sadr's followers created a tight-knit network of mosque leaders prepared to respond to Muqtada al-Sadr's call. This call went out even before Baghdad's fall.

Based on the rapidity of action, Muqtada al-Sadr's movement was prepared to act. According to Juan Cole, al-Sadr "established the most effective religious opposition movement in Iraq."^[13] As U.S. tanks dashed across Iraq, Muqtada al-Sadr and his vanguard of like-minded clerics reactivated mosques, deployed a militia, assumed control of regional Ba'ath Party institutions, and prepared social services. While traditional leaders in Najaf waited for Saddam to topple, Sadrist clerics opened mosques closed by the Ba'athists for Friday prayers. Al-Sadr focused his efforts in the Shi'a slums of Sadr City (renamed from Saddam City after the fall of Baghdad), Kufa, as well as the Shi'a holy city of Najaf.

Sadr used "mosques and Sadr movement preachers" as the primary mobilizing structures. As evidence of the advanced preparation, on April 9, 2003, Ayatollah Kazim al-Hai'ri (Sadiq al Sadr's designate) recognized Muqtada al-Sadr as his representative in Iraq. Even as Baghdad was being liberated, Sadr established his legitimacy to lead the Sadr II movement. As Sadr's militia patrolled the streets of Sadr City and Kufa in April 2003, Sadr and his like-minded clerics crafted the message to rally and sustain the Sadr legacy.

Frames of the Sadrist Movement

In a brilliant move, Muqtada al-Sadr used frames provided by an already trusted and martyred source, his father, Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr. Muqtada al-Sadr declared that only the rulings issued by Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr (and by extension al-Hai'ri) were to be followed. By doing so, he attempted to discredit the rulings of Grand Ayatollahs al-Sistani and al-Hakim, while also deftly avoiding the issue of his lack of religious credentials.

Sadrist mosque leaders, who led prayers on April 9th, echoed the message of Sadiq al-Sadr:

- Loyal, devout Iraqis live by Islamic law;
- Oppose foreign influence;
- Iraqi clerics who fled Iraq abrogated their responsibilities;
- Clerics not born in Iraq (al-Sistani) should not speak for Iraqis;
- God (not the U.S. Coalition) freed the Iraqi people.

This message provided the foundation for the cultural frames that Sadr would use to create a unique collective identity.

The foundation of Muqtada al-Sadr's ideology and message is Shi'a Islam, specifically an activist, puritanical view espoused by his father.^[14] All other frames and movement actions flow from this idea. In doing so, Muqtada al-Sadr's movement focused on distinguishing itself from other leaders within the Iraqi Shi'a community, as well as the U.S.-led Coalition. All supporting frames focused on actions and symbols that distinguish Muqtada al-Sadr and the Sadr II movement from traditional Iraqi Shi'a jurists. What results is an intra-community (Iraqi Shi'a) fight for credibility and stature.^[15] Quintan Wiktorowicz describes this phenomenon in Islamic movements as:

A movement group...asserts its authority to speak on behalf of an issue or constituency by emphasizing the perceived knowledge, character, and logic of its popular intellectuals while attacking those of rivals. Four basic framing strategies relevant to the credibility of popular intellectuals are identified: 1) vilification—demonizing popular intellectuals; 2) exaltation—praising

in-group popular intellectuals; 3) credentialing—emphasizing the expertise of the in-group intellectuals; and 4) de-credentialing—raising a question about the expertise of rivals.[16]

While Wiktorowicz's research focuses on the role of credibility within a Sunni context, his framework holds true for analyzing Shi'a Iraq. Muqtada al-Sadr initiated a "competition for resources and symbolic leadership" within the Shi'a community in Iraq.[17] Each of these strategies has been employed by the Sadr II movement to improve the stature of Muqtada al-Sadr, while attempting to mitigate the influence of far more senior, traditional Shi'a jurists.

Separating the Sadr II movement from traditional Shi'a clerics, Muqtada al-Sadr moved rapidly to provide services, while simultaneously vilifying rival jurists. The Sadrists moved quickly following the fall of the Hussein regime to claim legitimacy. While the Sadrists filled a gap in Shi'a slums, offering social service support and establishing security patrols, their most significant action was holding Friday prayers, as early as April 9, 2003. In doing so, Sadrist clerics distinguished themselves from supporters of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, who chose not to hold prayers until security had improved throughout the country. Additionally, Sadr attacked al-Sistani for remaining apolitical in the face of the Coalition occupation, labeling al-Sistani "apolitical because he is not an Iraqi." [18] Similarly, the Sadr Movement vilified other Shi'a jurists, such as al-Hakim and al-Khu'i because they had fled Hussein's Iraq in exile.

In contrast, the Sadrists also exalted the teachings of Muqtada's father. The Sadr II movement also quickly emphasized the legitimacy of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr's message. Saddam City was renamed Sadr City in tribute to Sadiq al-Sadr, his picture placed on every street corner, and mosque leaders echoed his message. Given the lack of a senior Islamic scholar within the Sadr II movement, the movement instead focused on the message of the martyred Sadiq al-Sadr, with Muqtada al-Sadr declaring that only the legal rulings of Sadiq al-Sadr were to be followed.[19]

For the Sadr II movement, credentialing was a challenge. Traditionally, the Iraqi Shi'a community is very hierarchical. Islamic scholars labor for years to receive their credentials as Islamic jurists, ultimately being conferred with the title of "Oracle of Emulation." Muqtada al-Sadr has not completed his studies and does not have the authority to issue legal rulings. To overcome this limitation, the Movement instead focused on the legal rulings of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, as the only true representative of the Shi'a community. The message is powerful, Sadiq al-Sadr was an Iraqi, Sadiq al-Sadr did not retreat into exile, and Sadiq al-Sadr gave his life for Iraqis by standing up to the Hussein regime. The irony in the message is that for Muqtada al-Sadr to claim legitimacy to this legacy, it required Sadiq al-Sadr's envoy in Iran (al-Ha'iri) to designate Muqtada al-Sadr as the Sadrist representative in Iraq.[20]

If credentialing the youthful Muqtada al-Sadr was a challenge, in Shi'a Iraq, questioning the expertise of senior clerics, such as Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani was by far the most difficult frame to support. To do so, the Sadrists did not challenge rival clerics by questioning their scholarly legitimacy, but rather developed sub-frames to weaken these leaders' moral authority. These sub-frames focused on four themes: anti-coalition, foreign influence, moral courage, and exclusivity of faith.

The Sadrists attacked the "silent jurists" in Najaf for not speaking out against the Coalition. Within days of the fall of Baghdad, Sadrist clerics called for the rapid departure of the Coalition. At the same time, they castigated traditional Shi'a clerics, such as al-Sistani and al-Hakim for remaining quiet. Muqtada al-Sadr used his father's martyrdom at the hands of Saddam as the symbol of the only Shi'a religious movement willing to risk death to free the Iraqi people. He attacked al-Sistani as being a foreigner (having been born in Iran), al-Hakim for his ties to Iran, and al-Khu'i for living in exile. He accused all of them as being "silent" and complicit with the American occupation. While attacking these leaders on moral grounds, Sadr also distinguished the Sadrist vision for Shi'a Iraq from those of his rivals. The highly puritanical, shari'a-based Islamic state that Sadr envisioned was in sharp contrast to the apolitical views of traditional Najaf.

This exclusivity was used to mobilize Shi'a (in particular the youth) as activists in the emerging Sadr II movement.

In the battle for organizational control of the Iraqi Shi'a population, the Sadr II movement successfully used multiple frames to mobilize collective action.

Repertoires of Action

The Sadr II movement leveraged its mobilizing structures very early in the occupation, rapidly producing repertoires of collective action that distinguished the Sadrists from traditional Najaf. Charles Tilly in his book, *The Politics of Collective Violence*, described the nature of violence within contentious politics:

Collective violence occupies a perilous but coherent place in contentious politics. It emerges from the ebb and flow of collective claim making and struggles for power. It interweaves incessantly with nonviolent politics, varies systematically with political regimes, and changes as a consequence of essentially the same causes that operate in nonviolent zones of collective political life.^[21]

The analysis of the Sadr II movement's collective action will focus on this "interweaving" of violent and non-violent collective action as part of a larger of a larger organizational struggle for control within the Iraqi Shi'a community.

Muqtada al-Sadr successfully mixed a range of non-violent actions as part of the movement's contentious actions. As early as April 19, 2003, Sadrists demonstrated against the U.S.-led occupation.^[22] The Sadrist mosques also became a central hub for social services. In August 2003, Juan Cole reported:

Observers on the ground report that the Sadr Movement controls the major mosques, Shi'ite community centers, hospitals, and soup kitchens in East Baghdad, Kufa, and Samarra, and has a strong presence in Najaf, Karbala, and Basra, as well. It is highly networked, and its preachers have taken a strong rhetorical line against what they view as an Anglo-American occupation.^[23]

The Sadrists extended the use of non-violence to include providing security within Shi'a areas unoccupied by the Coalition forces. These non-violent acts challenged the role of the Coalition. While these non-violent acts reinforced the Sadr message, it was violent contention that the Sadr Movement directly challenged the Coalition.

Immediately following the U.S. "thunder run" into Baghdad, the Sadr II movement embraced violence as a repertoire of collective action. As previously discussed, the mosque was the foundation of mobilization within the Sadr II movement. Mosques became not only a mobilization structure, but a powerful symbol for the movement. In particular, the historic mosques in Najaf and Karbala were used by the Sadr II movement as symbols in both non-violent and violent collective action. While the Sadrists' most significant and violent collective actions occurred in stand-offs with the Coalition in 2004, the Sadr II movement had in fact used violent actions, as early as April 2003, to expand the movement.

As the Hussein regime fell, Sadrists filled the power vacuum in Shi'a slums. Sadrist militias liberated weapons and began patrolling areas as a security force. While Sadrists were providing security in Sadr City and Kufa, some of Sadr's most loyal (and violent) supporters in Najaf quickly turned to violence. The Imam Ali shrine in Najaf is one of the holiest Shi'a sites in Iraq. During Operation Iraqi Freedom, Saddam's forces had used the mosque as a safe haven to attack advancing U.S. forces. Once Saddam's fedayeen fled the mosque, the mosque was controlled by

a Sadr II militia. It was here on April 10, 2003 that Sadrists would use violence as a means of contention in the Shi'a organizational conflict.

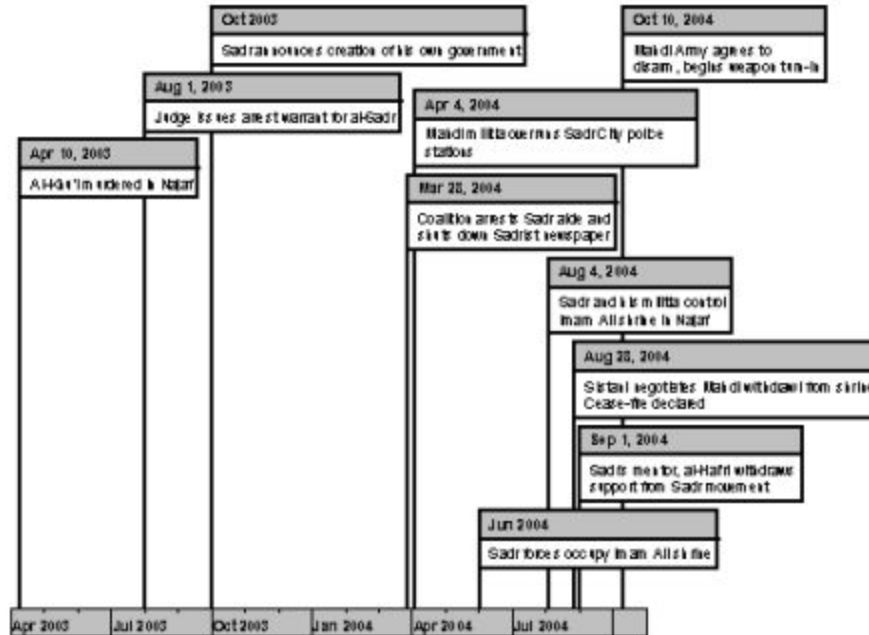
When attempting to gain access to the Imam Ali mosque controlled by Sadr Movement forces, Abd al-Majid al-Khu'i was the first casualty of organizational violence. Al-Khu'i, the son of the former Object of Emulation, challenged the Sadr forces and attempted to gain control of the mosque. An Iraqi journalist describes the scene:

An angry crowd gathered in the square outside the shrine, chanting slogans in favor of Muqtada al-Sadr. Determined to prevent Kalidar from becoming established at the shrine, they demanded that he be surrendered to them. They were also enraged that al-Khu'i was accompanied by Mahir al-Yasiri, an Iraqi Shi'ite settled in Dearborn, Michigan, who was part of an expatriate group helping the U.S. forces and who was wearing a U.S. flack jacket. The encounter became a firefight when someone in al-Khu'i's party, perhaps al-Khu'i himself, fired a pistol over the heads of the Sadr Movement mob. They replied with gunfire, killing al-Yasiri. Eyewitness Ma'd Fayyad says that after an hour-long standoff, al-Khu'i and his party surrendered. He then maintains that al-Khu'i and others were bound and taken to Muqtada al-Sadr's house, but that the latter declined to admit them and that the word came back out that they should be killed in the square. Fayyad admits, however, that he had loosened his ropes and escaped before this point, so that he may have had this story second hand. Other accounts suggest a more spontaneous mob action, in which the crowd closed on al-Khu'i and Kalidar and stabbed them to death.[\[24\]](#)

An Iraqi judge investigated the incident and determined that the "mob" was in fact operating under the guidance of Muqtada al-Sadr, issuing a warrant for Sadr's arrest for the death of al-Khu'i.[\[25\]](#) According to the judge, Sadr's militia brought al-Khu'i to Sadr's Najaf headquarters to seek guidance from al-Sadr. Reportedly, they were told, "Take him away and kill him in your special way."[\[26\]](#) Whether the Sadrist actions were those of an angry mob or the action of a controlled militia is now largely irrelevant. This event provides the backdrop for future violent confrontations between the Sadr movement and the Coalition; strategic interactions that would increase the stature of Muqtada al-Sadr and the Sadr II movement.

In early summer 2003, Muqtada al-Sadr announced the formation of the Mahdi Army, his own militia to counter the American occupation.[\[27\]](#) The Mahdi Army would confront Coalition forces throughout 2004. Having begun the conflict as a relatively unknown junior cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr continued to use violence as contention against the Coalition forces. While a senior U.S. commander described Muqtada al-Sadr as, "a poser, a little boy playing cleric", al-Sadr continued to defy U.S. forces.[\[28\]](#) [Figure 1](#) provides a timeline of these confrontations with U.S. forces.

Figure 1: Timeline of Sadrist Collective Action, April 2003–November 2004



The final confrontation with Coalition forces in August 2004 was by far the most deadly, in which Sadr forces took control of the Imam Ali Shrine in Najaf. Ultimately, hundreds of Sadr supporters were killed during this standoff, which ended with an agreement brokered by Sadr's rival, Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani. Following this agreement, Sadr agreed to disarm his militia.

While Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani does not support Sadr or his agenda, the Sadr Movement did potentially benefit from Sistani's non-violent contention against specific Coalition policies. In January 2004, Sistani issued a *fatwa* denouncing the Coalition Provisional Authority's plan for phase handover of sovereignty to an Iraqi government. Overnight hundreds of thousands of demonstrators took to the streets in protest.^[29] Unbelievably, the U.S.-led Coalition was on the wrong end of the transition to democracy; the Iraqis demanded democracy and the Coalition's plan delayed it. It is likely that these demonstrations included segments of the Shi'a population that previously had not demonstrated with Sadr against the Coalition, potentially increasing oppositional consciousness within a new segment of the Shi'a population.

Conclusion

Muqtada al-Sadr and the Sadr Movement are competing in an organizational fight for leadership within the Iraqi Shi'a community.^[30] The Sadrist mobilization structures, frames, and repertoires of action center on increasing the stature of Muqtada al-Sadr within the Iraqi Shi'a population. How successful has the Sadr Movement been in gaining ground on the traditional Shi'a leadership? In polling conducted by the Oxford Research Institute in February 2004, only 1.5 percent of Iraqis surveyed identified Muqtada al-Sadr as the leader they most trusted. By June 2004, Sadr was identified as most trusted by 7.4 percent of those surveyed. In comparison, Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani received ten percent support from those surveyed. While the numbers are not enormous, Sadr's rise from unknown to a significant opposition leader was meteoric. This increase in stature may have caused Sadr to overreach in August 2004.

Sistani's diffusing of the Najaf standoff in August 2004 was seen as an enormous victory for the apolitical Sistani and a great defeat for Muqtada al-Sadr. While the Najaf defeat and the success of the January 2005 elections did not enhance Sadr's status, it is important to note that Sadr represents a unique political space within Iraq. Muqtada al-Sadr is the only public figure who has consistently opposed the Coalition. All of the Sadr Movement's mobilization structures remain in place; Sadr is positioned to reinitiate his frames and repertoires if the new Iraqi government falters.

Recent demonstrations in Iraq organized by the Sadr Movement reiterate Sadr's staying power. In April 2005, tens of thousands of Shi'a protestors marked the anniversary of Baghdad's fall by marching in the streets against the U.S.-led occupation.^[31] Sadr will not go away. The use of mosques as a core mobilization structure will serve as a continued hub to preach Sadr's message to the Shi'a population. The recent demonstrations by the Sadr Movement reemphasize the significance of his fight for leadership within the Shi'a community. The Sadrist frames and actions, while sometimes directed at U.S. forces and the Coalition, reinforce Sadr's fight for Shi'a community leadership.

In summary, social movement theory proved an excellent framework to evaluate the Sadr II Movement in Iraq. Viewed through the SMT lens, an analysis of the oppositions' opportunity, mobilization structures, framing processes, and repertoires of action produced a different vantage point for analysis; one that yields a more clear understanding of the organizational fight being conducted by the Sadr II Movement.

About the Author

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5. *Ibid.*, 4.
6. *Ibid.*, 3.
7. Abedin, Mahan, "[Dossier: The Sadrist Movement](#)," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* 5, no. 6 (July 2003).
8. Cole, *Op. Cit.*
9. Dodge, Toby, Steven Simon, *Op. Cit.*, 171.
10. Ayatollah Kazim al-Hai'ri was studying in Iran when designated by Sadiq al-Sadr as his designate. Prior to the fall of Hussein's regime, al-Hai'ri decided to stay in Iran following the conflict, where he remains.
11. Jabar, Faleh, *Op. Cit.*
12. Muqtada al-Sadr's age is estimated between twenty-five and thirty.
13. Cole, *Op. Cit.*
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17. [*Ibid.*](#)
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23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid*, 15.

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